



# Denise Chávez

“

*In our family, men usually come first. Then God and Country. Country was last. Should be last. When you grow up in the Southwest, your state is your country. There exists no other country outside that which you know. Likewise, neighborhood is a country. As your family is a country. As your house is a country. As you are a country.*

— Face of an Angel

”



## Biography

Denise Chávez was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico on August 15, 1948 to Epifanio and Delfina Chávez. Though her father was absent through much of her childhood, Chávez was influenced by the presence of her mother, who was a schoolteacher, and her two sisters, Faride Conway and Margo Chávez. Las Cruces, which is only forty miles from the Mexican border, lies in a unique region in America, distinguished by its cross-fertilization of Mexican and American cultures. Her household influences included many Mexican women, who not only cooked and cleaned the Chávez residence, but also helped to raise the three Chávez girls.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1948
- \* Chicana novelist and playwright
- \* Considers herself a “performance writer”

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## Biography continued

The bilingual backdrop of the Southern New Mexico town and the presence of Mexican help within the Chávez home helped to forge an appreciation for the art of bilingualism in Chávez. Her childhood was filled with the oral tradition of storytelling, which was a tremendous influence on Chávez, and is the reason that she refers to herself as a “performance writer.” Her success in writing, she says, “comes from loving a good story, from having heard from the very best storytellers that one could possibly hear stories from” (Wheatwind 6).

When Chávez attended the Madonna High School in Mesilla, New Mexico, she enrolled in a theater class and discovered an interest in drama as a means of personal expression. She was awarded a drama scholarship to New Mexico State University where she studied with Mark Medoff, author of the play *Children of a Lesser God*. She received her bachelor’s degree in drama in 1974, and went on to study at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, where she received a master of fine arts degree in drama in 1974. She worked in the Dallas Theater Center, and continued her studies in drama and writing until 1984, when she received a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from the University of New Mexico.

Chávez began writing play productions in the early 1970s, and her early work focused on the social and economic issues of the Chicano culture as well as bilingual speech and Chicano humor. Her more recent play productions are an expansion of her early themes, and tend to employ a more universal reflection of the state of society and self, as well as a broader experimentation with dramatic settings and style. Chávez has also written a wealth of poetry and short fiction, and in 1986, a collection of her short stories was published as a novel, *The Last of the Menu Girls*. These short stories, all inter-related, seem to recollect Chávez’s own experiences; Rocio, her protagonist, has an absent father and works in a hospital, a job that Chávez once held as well.

The theme of service is prevalent in both *The Last of the Menu Girls*, and *Face of an Angel*, in the context of work, relationships, motherhood, and religion. In *Face of an Angel*, Soveida Dosamantes is a career waitress who compiles her knowledge of service in a book that documents the methods of achieving success in the workplace through professionalism, restraint, and proper attire. The humorous tone of Soveida’s book of service is underscored by her startling insight into the origins of woman’s calling to service in the Chicano society.



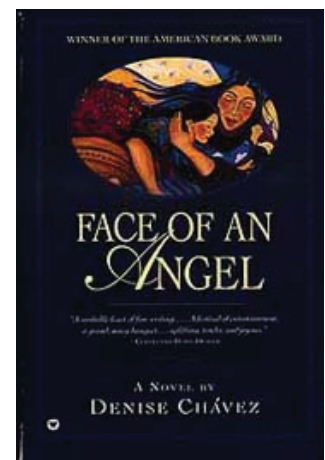
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## Biography continued

Although her poetry, short stories, and novels seem to shift focus from a broad view of the societal and economic issues of Chicano culture to a self-reflective exploration of women and service, Chávez does not cease to embrace her Chicano heritage and her deep rooted appreciation for the bilingual tongue. She integrates bilingualism into her works so completely that she even refuses to italicize Spanish words and phrases, a decision that has caused many an argument with her editors. “It’s time for readers to pick up a little Spanish,” she states. “It’s like a plate of food with salsa, with the Spanish words the salsa. It gives [the writings] flavor” (Moran 3).

Chávez has found much strength and support in a network of fellow Chicano and Chicana writers, including Roberto Anaya, who encouraged her to send *The Last of the Menu Girls* to his publishers, and Sandra Cisneros, who praises *Face of an Angel*, saying, “I love this book so much it sounds like I’m lying” (Nericcio 792). Chávez is very active in the Chicano community, claiming her work is written for the poor and forgotten. Indeed, the characters in her writings are typically common folk, and it is through these characters that Chávez celebrates the strength and dignity of the working class.

Chávez has received many awards for her works, most notably the Puerto del Sol Fiction Award for *The Last of the Menu Girls* and the American Book Award for *Face of an Angel*. She continues to surround herself in literature by teaching creative writing in the English department of New Mexico State University. She lives in the house she grew up in and writes from the room in which she was born.





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## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

*Loving Pedro Infante: a Novel* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000)

*Face of an Angel* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994)

*The Woman Who Knew the Language of Animals* (Houghton Mifflin, 1992)

*The Last of the Menu Girls* (Arte Público Press, 1986)

Numerous plays, including *Novitiates* (Dallas Theatre Center, 1973); *The Mask of November* (Northern New Mexico Community College, 1975); *The Flying Tortilla Man* (Northern New Mexico Community College, 1975); *Elevators* (Munn Theatre, 1977); *The Adobe Rabbit* (Taos Community Auditorium, 1980); *Nacimiento* (Albuquerque, 1980); *Santa Fe Charm* (Santa Fe Armory for the Arts, 1980); *An Evening of Theater* (1981); *How Junior got Thrown in the Joint* (State Penitentiary of New Mexico, 1981); *Si, Hay Posada* (Nuestro Teatro, 1981); *El Santero De Cordova* (Fiesta Artesana, 1981); *The Green Madonna* (Santa Fe Armory for the Arts, 1982); *Hecho en Mexico* (Kimo Theatre, 1983); *La Morenita* (Immaculate Heart of Mary Cathedral, 1983); *Francis!*, (Immaculate Heart of Mary Cathedral, 1983); *Plaza* (Kimo Theatre, 1984); *Plague-Time* (1985); *Novena Narrative* (various cities, 1987); *The Step* (University of New Mexico Press, 1987); *Language of Vision* (Albuquerque Convention Center, 1988); *Women in the State of Grace* (Grinnell College, 1989).

### Works Edited by the Author

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*Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature* (Arte Público, 1988).

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*Cuentos Chicanos: A Short Story Anthology* (University of New Mexico Press, 1984).

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### Spanish

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